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ABSTRACT

Several sets of attitudes of young women were investigated: (1) timing of parenthood and its effects on marriage; (2) roles of males and females: (3) contributions of children to marriage; and (4) their own preparedness to be parents. Subjects were 212 undergraduate females enrolled in family or women's studies courses, who completed the Timing for Parenthood Scale. Results indicated: a general expectation that parenthood would be among their adult roles, but that it would be delayed: a rejection of the idea that motherhood is a prerequisite to women's happiness and fulfillment; a somewhat confused perception of the effect of parenthood on the male role: and a general suggestion that although they intend to be parents, they assess their preparation to do so as limited. (Author)

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CONTEMPORARY WOMEN AND THEIR ATTITUDES TOWARD PARENTHOOD

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It was assumed in earlier decades that children were the natural and normal outcome of marriage and as such a large family was deemed more appropriate than a small family. Since children were considered essential for family "togetherness" and, many believed, to women's sense of fulfillment, beginning a family early in marriage was the ideal. Women who did not have children early in their marriages were pitied for their incomplete, unfulfilled lives (Bernard, 1975; Hartley, 1972). This attitude was not only widely held among the public, but within the academic community of family scholars (Eversoll, Knaub & Voss, 1979).

It is often suggested that we are living in a "freedom of choice" era regarding the adult roles (separately and in combination) of work, adult relationships and living arrangements, and parenting. Although behavioral changes indicating some liberalization in lifestyle choices are documented (Libbey & Whitehurst, 1977; Hawke & Knox, 1977; Rapoport & Rapoport, 1971), one role for which behavior continues to be astoundingly homogeneous is women's participation in motherhood.

Most women have in the past and will continue to become mothers (Bernard, 1974, 1975; Frieze, Parsons, Johnson, Ruble & Zellman, 1978; Blake, 1979). That females are socialized from babyhood onward to want and need to become mothers is

well documented (Bernard, 1975; Walum, 1977; Hoffman, 1977; Bem & Bem, 1976). Further, recent research suggests that (a) the proportion of women expecting or preferring to be permanently childless remains small (2.5% in 1977), and (b) women continue to express a high level of consensus the parenthood is an advantaged (Blake, 1979). Together these bodies of literature would seem to predict a future in which most women will continue to become parents.

Although choosing the role of motherhood remains surprisingly consistent with women, questions remain regarding attitudes toward timing of parenthood. For example, as recently as 1969, research indicated that attitudes existed which would constitute a prevasive societal pressure toward having children early in marriage (Maxwell & Montgomery, 1969). On the other hand, there is some suggestion that women are now waiting longer after marriage to have their first child (Current Population Reports, 1977). It has been argued that a relationship exists between the delay of parenthood and such variables as educational level (Maxwell & Montgomery, 1969: Bernard, 1975), career orientation (Bernard, 1975), and feminist ideology (Lott, 1973). What then are the attitudes of young women today toward the timing of parenthood? The present study was designed to determine young women's attitudes toward timing of parenthood, the perceived effect of parenthood on the marital relationship, the perceived effect of parenthood on males as well as females, the perceived contribution of children to the relationship, and the sample's perceived adequacy of their preparation to parent.

Sample

The sample consisted of undergraduate students at a large, midwestern university in sophomore-, junior-, and senior-level family or women's studies courses. A total population of 212 students was obtained, all of them enrolled in one of four undergraduate courses (i.e., Marriage and The Family, Preparation for Parenthood, Social-Psychology of Family Interaction, and Women in Contemporary Society). The respondents were primarily Anglo-Americans (99%), between the ages of 18-23 (89.6%), unmarried (81.6%), without children (93.6%), and from intact (92.9%), middle class families (based on the Hollingshead Two-factor Index of Social Position). Fifty-three percent of the subjects mothers were employed outside the home. With reference to the size of their family of orientation, 46.5 percent were from families of three or fewer children and 53.5 percent were from families four or more children (mean number of children 3.9).

Instrumentation and Statistical Treatment

The Timing for Parenthood Scale developed by Maxwell and Montgomery (1969), constructed to measure attitudes toward parenthood, was administered the first day of spring semester classes to obtain data for the present study. The items in the Likert-type scale were characterized by five degrees of response from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Responses favoring early parenthood were given the highest score and those favoring delayed parenthood were given the lowest score. The possible score range was from 10-50. In an item

analysis conducted by Maxwell and Montgomery, each of the ten scale items was found to discriminate significantly between upper and lower quartile groups at the .001 level of significance. In addition, an item was constructed for this study to measure perceived preparation for parenthood, and separate items were developed to obtain necessary demographic information.

The data analysis was comprised first of a frequency count for the sample as a whole, then an analysis of variance was employed to establish the existence of any significant variation among the groups (designated by course enrollment), followed by the Student-Newman-Kuells procedure to identify the source of the group variation in statistically significant comparisons.

Results

The data obtained in this research indicate that young women do expect to parent (94.6%) as one of their adult roles. However, the scale items (see Table I) indicate that although women expect to become parents they are largely in favor of delayed rather than early parenthood. Only 4.3 percent of the sample agreed that married couples with a mature love will be eager to have children as soon as possible (Item 8). In fact, only 7.5 percent agreed that the best time to add children was the first two years. A majority of the sample (78.8%) felt it was important to enjoy their social life first and have children later in the marriage (Item 2). Further support of this attitude is provided by the fact that only 14.6 percent agreed that couples who do not have children are left out of

social circles (Item 9). This indicates that for this sample, parenthood is no longer viewed as a necessary requirement for maintaining adult friendships. Furthermore, only 15 percent of the sample agreed that people should have children while they are still young in order to ensure parent/child friendship (Item 10).

Table I about here

The data in this study seem to support the attitude that women may no longer need parenthood to feel fulfilled, for 81.7 percent of the respondents disagreed that young married women lacked self-fulfillment until they have a child (Item 6). The present sample was largely (72.7%) in disagreement with the notion that women are generally happier if they have children early in the marriage (Item 4); however, 22.1 percent were undecided on this item.

The perceived influence that children exert on the male introduced ambiguity into an otherwise consistent overall parenthood attitude. This overall pattern generally reflected less emphasis on parenthood being essential to other facets of adult life. However, this decisive agree or disagree pattern was not evident in the response to Item 5. Only 34.9 percent of the sample agreed that children tie the male closer to the marriage, while 44.8 percent disagreed and 20.3 percent were undecided.

The total scale score of each individual was viewed as a measure of the perceived desirability of having children

early in marriage. On the basis of these findings it appears that delayed parenthood was favored.

Although the study indicates that women expect to become mothers, more than half (53.1%) did not feel that they were well prepared to take on the parent role; only 34.7 percent felt they were well prepared. When asked how many children they expected to have, support for the two-child family (46.5%) was indicated, with 2.8 percent desiring one child, 23.5 percent desiring three children and 22 percent desiring four or more. The subjects were also asked to indicate the sex preference of the first child. Strong preference for a male first-born (61%) was identified, while 9.9 percent preferred female first-borns and 23.9 percent indicated no sex preference. A reversal occurred when the respondents were asked their sex preference of the second child, with 54.5 percent favoring a female child, 13.6 percent preferring a male, and 23.9 percent having no sex preference.

Significant differences were observed between the women's studies group and the family-course groups on the total score, on the first three items of the scale, and on the item measuring perceived preparation for parenthood (see Table 2). Although all student groups responded in the direction favoring delayed parenthood, the women's studies group was significantly more in favor on Items 1, 2 and 3 (see Table 2). The total score would also reflect this general delayed directionality, only significantly stronger among the women's studies group than all other student groups. In addition, the item that measured

perceived preparation for parenthood indicated that the women's studies students perceived themselves as less well-prepared to function as parents.

Table 2 about here

Summary and Discussion

Clearly the results of this study supported the contention that women continue to view parenthood as a desirable role. This finding is hardly a surprise given the strong enculturation process to which women have continued to be exposed regarding the desirability of the parenthood role.

However, the attitudes demonstrated by this sample concerning the timing of parenthood represent a considerable shift. Whereas research just a decade ago (Maxwell and Montgomery, 1969) suggested that early parenthood was perceived as desirable, the present study was strongly supportive of delayed parenthood. Such a trend toward delaying parenthood particularly among educated women was forecast by Bernard in 1975.

Related to the general support for delayed parenthood was a strong rejection of the notions that: 1) children are necessary to a woman's sense of fulfillment or happiness, 2) children are a requirement for maintaining friendships among other adults who have children, and 3) that children represent an expression of mature love.

That conflicting societal messages exist regarding parenthood and its impact on men and women's lives was demonstrated

by the ambiguous responses to the item dealing directly with the male role. The sample appeared to be confused as to whether children tie a male closer to the marriage or not. Perhaps this attitude is reflective of the current divorce rate which may suggest to them that even among couples with children, the males are not necessarily "tied" to the marriage. Another possibility may be that as women, the sample was more aware of the impositions and committment required of motherhood in a patriarchal society and less certain of the bindery effects of fatherhood.

In addition the mixed societal messages seem to be evidenced in the fact that although the majority of the sample expect to become parents, over half felt inadequately prepared to function as mothers. Certainly the potential for disillusionment and dissappointment would seem to exist. Further research is warranted on this issue, particularly research utilizing a longitudinal design which would compare a sample's perceived attitudes with their actual decisions and experience regarding parenthood.

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TABLE 1. SCALE ITEMS BY PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS AGREEING AND DISAGREEING*

	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
1. The best time to begin having children is usuably within the first two years of marriage.	7.5%	86.8%	5.7%
2. It is important for a young couple to enjoy their social life first and to have children later in the marriage.	78.8%	10.8%	11.3%
3. A marriage relationship is strengthened if children are born in the early years of marriage.	6.6%	76.9%	16.5%
4. Women are generally happier if they have children early in their marriage.	5.2%	72.7%	22.1%
5. Men are generally tied closer to the marriage when there are children in the home.	34.9%	44.8%	20.3%
6. Most young married women lack self-fulfillment until they have a child.	8.9%	81.7%	9.4%
7. Young couples who do not have children are usually unable to do so.	2.8%	93.9%	2.8%
8. Married couples who have mature love for each other will be eager to have a child as soon as possible.	4.3%	84.4%	11.3%
9. Couples who do not have children cannot share in the major interests of their friends who are parents, and are therefore left out of most social circles.	14.6%	77.8%	7.5%
10. Children enjoy their parents more when the parents are nearer their own age; therefore, parents should have children while they are still young.	15.6%	71.2%	13.2%
11. In general, research indicates that the majority of couples approaching parenthood for the first time have had little or no previous child care experience beyond sporadic baby sitting, a course in child psychology, or occasional care of younger siblings. Considering your own background preparation for parenthood, would you judge that you are well-prepared for the parenting experience?	34.7%	53.1%	12.2%

*In the table, the percentages strongly agreeing and agreeing were combined, and the percentages strongly disagreeing and disagreeing were combined, as in the Maxwell and Montgomery study.

**Item 11 was constructed to determine perceived preparation to parent.

TABLE 2. MEAN SCORES FOR SCALE ITEMS
(ATOP)

	Marriage and The Family	Preparation For Parenting	Social-Psychology Of Family	Womens Studie
1. The best time to begin having children is usually within the first two years of marriage.	1.92	2.16	2.03	1.56*
2. It is important for a young couple to enjoy their social life first and to have children later in the marriage.	2.21	2.43	2.08	1.81*
3. A marriage relationship is strengthened if children are born in the early years of marriage.	2.26	2.13	2.00	1.50*
4. Women are generally happier if they have children early in their marriage.	2.30	2.21	2.09	1.92
5. Men are generally tied closer to the marriage when there are children in the home.	2.93	2.97	2.85	2.47
6. Most young married women lack self-fulfillment until they have a child.	1.97	2.21	2.04	1.81
7. Young couples who do not have children are usually unable to do so.	1.63	1.75	1.60	1.57
8. Married couples who have mature love for each other will be eager to have a child as soon as possible.	1.96	2.10	1.95	1.73
9. Couples who do not have children cannot share in the major interests of their friends who are parents, and are therefore left out of most social circles.	2.14	2.21	2.27	2.15
10. Children enjoy their parents more when the parents are nearer their own age; therefore, parents should have children while they are still young.	2.46	2.29	2.22	1.97
11. In general, research indicates that the majority of couples approaching parenthood for the first time have had little or no previous child care experience beyond sporadic baby sitting, a course in child psychology, or occasional care of younger siblings. Considering your own background preparation for parenthood, would you judge that you are well-prepared for the parenting experience?	2.60	2.78	3.26	2.26
Item Sum	21.80	22.51	21.18	18.50*

*Significant at .05 Level